

# Robert

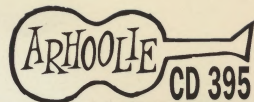
When a  
Man Takes  
the Blues

# Pete Williams

ARHOLLE 395

## ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS

Vol. 2 - When a Man Takes the Blues



Over 60 Minutes of Classic BLUES

1. WHEN A MAN TAKES THE BLUES (4:38) (\*)
2. I HAD TROUBLE (4:15) (\*)
3. ALL NIGHT LONG (4:40) (\*)
4. DYIN' SOUL (4:15)
5. I GOT THE BLUES SO BAD (3:35)
6. SINNER DON'T YOU KNOW (4:30) (\*)
7. HOT SPRINGS BLUES (Peetie Wheatstraw Blues) (5:55) (\*)
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12. WIFE AND FARM BLUES (Take 2) (6:20) (\*)
13. I WANT TO DIE EASY (4:38) (\*)
14. ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS MONOLOGUE (11:00) (\*)

(\*) = previously unreleased. Total Time: 71:53



Robert Pete Williams - vocals with 6 and 12 string guitar; with unknown 2nd guitar on #7; 2nd voice on #12 by Sallie (Dotsin?); and unknown washboard on #13.

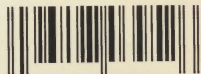
#1, 2, & 14 recorded by Chris Strachwitz in Berkeley, Ca., April 1970. #3-13 recorded by Dr. Harry Oster in Louisiana between 1959 and 1960.

Cover photo by Chris Strachwitz  
Cover by Wayne Pope

Edited by Henry Kaiser  
Produced by Chris Strachwitz & Harry Oster

*This CD #395 is Volume two of two. Volume one is available on Arhoolie CD #394.*

All songs composed or arranged by Robert Pete Williams and © by Tradition Music Co. (BMI).



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## Robert Pete Williams

### "When a Man Takes the Blues"

Robert Williams (Pete is a nickname acquired as a teenager) was born March 14, 1914 in Zachary, La., just north of Baton Rouge. His parents were sharecroppers and he was one of nine children. With almost no education he worked most of his life on farms, as a barrel maker, on highway crews, levee camps, and at many other varied jobs while playing dances and country parties on the side.

Impressed by several local blues singers, among them Walker Green, Willie Hudson, and Dan Jackson, young Robert learned to play both bottle neck style and regular guitar. Two sisters and a brother were musicians as well. Blind Lemon Jefferson, whose speed and flexibility impressed Robert greatly, was his favorite. Though he never saw Blind Lemon perform, he heard his records, which sold widely in the late 1920s throughout the rural South.

In 1935 Robert Pete visited a white

lady's house where a friend of his was working as a cook. The lady sold him a \$65 guitar, which her son would not play, for just \$4.50. According to Larry Seidler (who spent some time with Robert Pete talking about his life): "white folks started havin' me play at their parties. I got to rappin' good with that guitar. They used to call me Peetie Wheatstraw 'cause I could play all of his tunes. I also liked Dan Jackson, a man who could play so well that once when he was at the depot he started to play and they gave him his money back and a pass for the train." Robert Pete developed a unique and personal guitar technique, unlike any other recorded blues musician. Although he knew and used many traditional lines and phrases as well as full songs (note: *Louise*) his most moving performances were often those improvised on the spot when a certain problem was tormenting him. Thus he was at his most intense when the blues were really

down on him.

Robert Pete Williams was convicted of murder and sent to Angola on April 6, 1956. (You can hear his own version of what happened on cut #14. Unfortunately the tape ran out as he recalled the court scene.) He was in his second year of a life sentence when the ability to improvise blues changed his life. "The warden knew I could play guitar — they furnished us with guitars — and he called me into his office and wanted to know if I still played that guitar and I said, 'yes, I do.' So Dr. Oster comes in and he asked me: 'Can you make up a prison blues, a talking blues?' I said, 'yes, I try' — and he hand me a twelve-string guitar. Well, I talked the blues and it was sad. It got the prison kind of worried."

Dr. Harry Oster recorded Robert Pete Williams on a number of occasions at Angola. The initial recordings were released on Dr. Oster's Folklyric label on an album entitled **Angola Prisoner's Blues** which included the absolutely devastating *Prisoner's Talking Blues* (soon to be available on Arhoolie CD 419) and resulted in a number of letters being sent

to Angola officials. One written by Dr. Oster himself was apparently the deciding factor which moved Governor Earl Long to parole Robert Pete in December of 1959. He was paroled to a farmer in Denham Springs, La., who had heard and was deeply moved by the remarkable recording and offered Robert Pete a job. After several years of semi-freedom during which time he was not allowed to travel, full pardon was finally granted to Robert Pete Williams in 1964, just in time for him to make an appearance at the Newport Folk Festival, to which he had been invited in previous years.

Since 1964 Robert Pete Williams traveled a good deal and in 1966 made an appearance at the Berkeley Folk Festival, produced by Barry Olivier, and during that stay on the West Coast he recorded an album for Takoma Records. Later that year he went to Europe with the annual American Folk Blues Festival tour produced by two German jazz and blues fans, Horst Lippman and Fritz Rau whose agency has since become Germany's number

one popular music production firm. Over the next decade Robert Pete appeared regularly at the annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival where Allison Minor and Quint Davis were responsible for presenting just about every interesting regional artist to ever-growing audiences who came to New Orleans every spring from all over the world. Unfortunately Robert Pete's intensely personal and emotional blues were never quite the kind of extrovert entertainment which was successful at the festivals. He had a hard time making ends meet and putting food on the table. In 1975 during his talk with Larry Seidler, Robert Pete put it this way: "The blues is something like this. Say I got a wife at home, you can do all you can for her but it can look like the more you do, the less you have. If you wake up busted it gives you the walkin' blues - take this guitar and walk away, cause I've been workin' since I was thirteen, scufflin', and now that I'm old at 61, with one foot in the grave and one out, I'm too old to get a job. If

I didn't have a truck or if they didn't send for me to play, I wouldn't have a dime. What gives you the blues is when you don't have something to give to a child. If I had the money to live off of I could practice and learn so much, but I have to work. I sell scrap iron with my truck. I don't get no money from my records—I just get a piece of bread. That one from Arhoolie is honest but if I didn't have a truck or they didn't send for me to play, I wouldn't have a dime."

Robert Pete continued to perform and record extensively to the end of the decade but sickness overtook him and he died on December 31, 1980. Robert Pete Williams is buried at Southern Memorial Gardens in the Parish of East Baton Rouge, in the Masonic Garden, Lot 5-C, Space 1.

*(Chris Strachwitz - 1993)*

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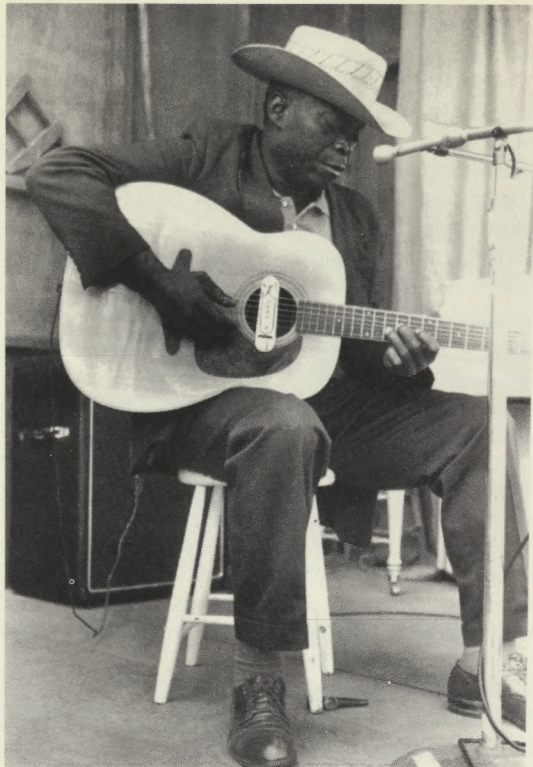


Photo © by Paul Oliver

Robert Pete Williams in Canada

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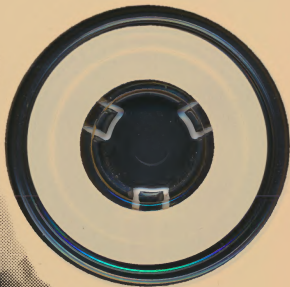
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**ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS**  
***"When a Man Takes the Blues"***



**CD-395**

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